

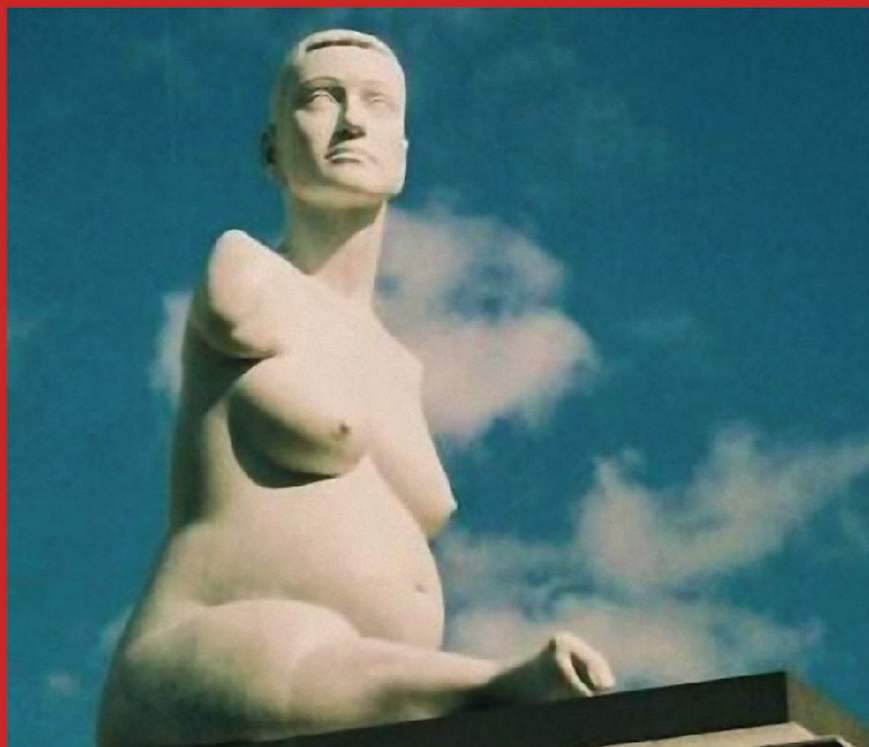


Regent's
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The Whitley Lecture 2013
Answering *Mendel's Dwarf*

Thinking Theologically About
Human Genetic Selection

Michael J. Peat



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The Whitley Lecture

The Whitley Lecture was first established in 1949 in honour of W.T. Whitley (1861–1947), the Baptist minister and historian. Following a pastorate in Bridlington, during which he also taught at Rawdon College in Yorkshire, Whitley became the first Principal of the Baptist College of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia, in 1891. This institution was later renamed Whitley College in his honour.

Whitley was a key figure in the formation of the Baptist Historical Society in 1908. He edited its journal, which soon gained an international reputation for the quality of its contents – a reputation it still enjoys nearly a century later as the *Baptist Quarterly*. His *A History of British Baptists* (London: Charles Griffin, 1923) remains an important source of information and comment for contemporary historians. Altogether he made an important contribution to Baptist life and self-understanding in Britain and Australia, providing a model of how a pastor-scholar might enrich the life and faith of others.

The establishment of the annual lecture in his name is designed as an encouragement to research and writing by Baptist scholars, and to enable the results of this work to be published. The giving of grants, advice and other forms of support by the Lectureship Committee serves the same purpose. The committee consists of representatives of the British Baptist Colleges, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, BMS World Mission, the Baptist Ministers' Fellowship and the Baptist Historical Society. These organizations also provide financial support for its work.

The Whitley Committee is delighted to welcome Michael Peat as the 2013 lecturer. Michael is a Baptist minister serving Whaley Bridge Uniting Partnership, a group of churches comprising two Methodist churches and a Local Ecumenical Partnership in the High Peak area of Derbyshire. After completing BA and MA degrees in Theology at King's College, University of London, he spent two years working in the NHS, undertaking administrative roles relating to research ethics and mental healthcare. Sensing a call to ordained ministry, Michael then spent a year as Pastoral Assistant at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church in London. He went on to train for Baptist ministry, and complete a doctorate, at Regent's Park College in Oxford.

This lecture reflects Michael's ongoing interest in ethical issues relating to prenatal human life. In 2007–08, he was one of the Baptist representatives on a working group set up by the Joint Public Issues Team to consider ethical issues arising in human embryology and early human life, contributing to the report, *Created in God's Image*. This year, he will begin teaching a course on Christian ethics at Luther King House in Manchester.

Michael is married to Helen, and together they have recently started getting to grips with being parents. In his spare time, Michael enjoys exploring the Peak District on foot, singing in a local choir, unwinding at cinemas, theatres and art galleries, and reading books of various kinds.

Sally Nelson

Secretary, Whitley Lectureship Management Committee

Answering *Mendel's Dwarf*: Thinking Theologically about Human Genetic Selection

All groups, all societies, are built on the model of a pyramid:
at the top are the powerful, the rich, the intelligent.
They are called to govern and guide.
At the bottom are the immigrants, the slaves, the servants,
people who are out of work, or who have a mental illness
or different forms of disabilities.
They are excluded, marginalised.
Here, Jesus is taking the place of a person at the bottom,
the last place,
the place of a slave.
For Peter this is impossible.
Little does he realize that Jesus came to transform
the model of a society
from a pyramid to a body,
where each and every person has a place,
whatever their abilities or disabilities,
where each one is dependent upon the other.
Each is called to fulfil a mission in the body of humanity
and of the church.
There is no “last place.”¹

1. Seeing Human Genetic Selection through a Literary Lens

Mendel's Dwarf is the title of a novel written by Simon Mawer, first published in 1997. Its relevance to this lecture is revealed in a poignant synopsis provided on the author's own website, in which we read that “[t]his novel takes us to the brave new world of genetic science through the eyes and heart of a man who knows that his own particular strain of humanity will have no place in it.”² The man in question (the main character in the story) is one Dr Benedict Lambert, a well respected geneticist who happens to be the great-great-great nephew of Gregor Mendel. Mendel was a 19th century Austrian friar now lauded as the ‘Father of Genetics’ because his years of research cross-pollinating and describing successive generations of pea plants, though grossly underestimated by the scientific community of his day, first demonstrated the fundamental principles of inheritance upon which the modern science of genetics is based.³ The “particular strain of humanity” which is “owned” by Benedict Lambert is a condition called achondroplastic dwarfism, in his case the result of a genetic mutation affecting bone growth which he did not inherit from either of his parents: Benedict Lambert is a dwarf.⁴ The whys and

¹ Excerpt from J. Vanier, “The model of the pyramid.” J. Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*. London, UK: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004. This piece of “meditative prose” reflects on the account in John's Gospel of Jesus washing his disciples' feet (John 13: 1-17).

² See <http://www.simonmawer.com/Mendel.htm>. Accessed 28th December 2012.

³ For an accessible account of Gregor Mendel's life, scientific milieu and pioneering research, see S. Mawer, *Gregor Mendel: Planting the Seeds of Genetics*. New York, NY: Abrams, 2006.

⁴ The vast majority of cases of achondroplasia have a new genetic mutation in the FGFR3 gene, i.e. parents of the affected offspring are not carriers of this genetic alteration. However, where one parent has achondroplasia, the statistical likelihood of having a child with achondroplasia increases to 50%, a fact which, as we shall see, plays a

wherefores surrounding Benedict's conviction that dwarfs like him have no place in a future "brave new world" point to assumptions prominent in contemporary moral debate, assumptions whose fitness for a Christian vision for the future of human genetic medicine is to be explored in this lecture.

I did not choose to begin by introducing this work of fiction because I intend to continue using Benedict Lambert's dwarfism as the focus for appraising the possibilities of genetic screening from a Christian moral perspective. In fact, the object of my concern throughout will be the full range of genetic conditions that are, or may in future be, identifiable through pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) after *in vitro* fertilisation.⁵ Rather, I chose to begin with *Mendel's Dwarf* because I think this story brings to the fore several moral themes regarding the ethos of contemporary medical technology that a Christian response is called to address. The first of these is the formation and use of predictive judgements about whether a life analysed at an embryonic stage is likely to be worth living in future. Is it possible, or desirable, to find criteria to predict the quality of a life that we can apply to the genetic coding of a human embryo, in order to identify embryos that should be eliminated because of their genetic characteristics?⁶ Or would such an account be problematic because of the extent to which meaning and purpose emerges as our lives unfold; that is, as our embodied characteristics and attitudes interact with, and are shaped by, the situations and relationships we experience throughout our lives.

Approached through the lens of a story (whether that story be fact or fiction), the rather abstract tone of these questions can be brought down to earth: Benedict Lambert's story enables us to gain a tangible sense of the challenge of these questions. On the one hand, Benedict insists that his gene-based idiosyncrasy is a curse that makes him "an aberration, a mutant, the product of pure malign chance," condemned to be perpetually frustrated by the condescending pity of others and denied the consolation of romance.⁷ When asked if he knows any good genetic jokes, Benedict replies, "how about *me*?" On the other hand, from an early age Benedict shows that he has a prodigious intellect and a fondness for spending time in libraries (not least as places of refuge from intrusive attention).⁸ He is intellectually gifted, and describes himself as patient,

significant role in the narrative of *Mendel's Dwarf*. For more details, see <http://ghr.nlm.nih.gov/condition/achondroplasia>. Accessed 21st January 2013.

⁵ Robert Song gives a clear description of pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), the process that enables human genetic screening: "About two to three days after fertilisation, when the embryo consists of around six to ten cells, one or two cells are removed from the embryo, a process which appears to be compatible with the continuing development of the embryo. The genetic material in these cells is then examined, at the chromosomal level if it is a matter of establishing the sex for X-linked disorders or identifying chromosomal abnormalities [e.g. Down's Syndrome], or at the level of the DNA sequence if it is (say) a single gene defect. ... For single-gene defects, cystic fibrosis is the most common disorder tested for, though an increasing number other disorders are also being included as reliable tests become available: Tay-Sachs disease, Duchenne muscular dystrophy, Lesch Nyham syndrome, and Marfan syndrome, amongst others." R. Song, *Human Genetics: Fabricating the Future*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002, pp. 21-22.

⁶ This question is further complicated by the fact that an increasing number of these genetic markers identify predispositions to certain medical conditions, i.e. a higher statistical likelihood of the condition actually affecting the carrier in later life, rather than a guarantee that the genetic mutation will be expressed in the carrier's phenotype (as is the case with an autosomal dominant genetic condition like achondroplasia). As John Bryant and Peter Turnpenney point out, the genetic markers for certain kinds of cancer identify a relatively high risk of developing the disease, whereas other mutations (e.g. the ApoE4 allele relating to Alzheimer's disease) confer lower risks and so weaken the capacity of the tests that reveal them to predict the later expression of the disease. J. Bryant and P. Turnpenney, "Genetics and Genetic Modification of Humans: Principles, Practice and Possibilities," in C. Deane-Drummond (ed.), *Brave New World? Theology, Ethics and the Human Genome*. London, UK and New York, NY: T&T Clark / Continuum, 2003, p. 17.

⁷ S. Mawer, *Mendel's Dwarf*. London, UK: Anchor, Transworld Publications Ltd., 1998, p. 20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25 and p. 30.

single-minded and determined, qualities that make him a first-class researcher at the Royal Institute of Genetics. Benedict's "curse" ironically becomes a major factor in making him famous in the world of science. It gives him the reason and motivation needed to discover the genetic "mutation" responsible for achondroplasia.⁹ For better or worse, this achievement earns him global respect in his scientific field. The ambiguity of attempting an overall evaluation of the desirability of Benedict Lambert's life is hinted at in the very first sentence of the novel: "Dr Benedict Lambert, the *celebrated* Benedict Lambert, the *diminutive* Benedict Lambert, the *courageous* Benedict Lambert (adjectives skating carefully around the essence of it all) stands to address the members of the Mendel Symposium."¹⁰ At one point, Benedict ponders what his "real" (his word), i.e. non-dwarf, self would look like.¹¹ I think his unfolding story indicates how far from obvious it is that the "crypto-Benedict" of his imagination would have been more likely to have a "better" life, even if it had been a life he imagines would be more to his liking.¹²

A second moral theme which is both important for our purposes and insightfully revealed in the plotline of *Mendel's Dwarf* concerns the way recent genetic technologies have significantly expanded the territory of human choosing: To borrow the title of an influential book on the ethics of human genetics, the expansion of our knowledge and abilities in this field represents a sizeable shift in our biological self-understanding from *chance* to *choice*.¹³ Those of a more radical libertarian persuasion tend to see in this shift a straightforward cause for celebration. The following rhetorical question posed by the philosopher John Harris encapsulates such an approach: "If it is not wrong to wish for a bonny, bouncing, brown-eyed, intelligent baby girl, with athletic potential and musical ability, in virtue of what might it be wrong to use technology to play fairy godmother to oneself and grant the wish that was parent to the child?"¹⁴ More cautious advocates typically plead for closer attention to kinds of harm whose growing effect is discreet and gradual. For example, a society that permits screening out embryos with certain disabilities may continue to claim that its respect for those already born with the same disabilities remains undiminished. But a more cautious advocate of genetic screening in principle may nevertheless insist that society remain alert to the ongoing possibility that more subtle forms of discrimination against those with disabilities could become entrenched.¹⁵ Jonathan Glover, a

⁹ Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 9. Italics mine.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² It is worth noting that the relentlessly negative account of dwarfism which the author gives to Benedict is not one he presumptuously assumes to be typical of real people with the same condition. In an article explaining his approach to writing the novel, Simon Mawer recalls how the experience of a close friend with achondroplasia influenced the outlook he chose to express in Benedict's narration. See S. Mawer, "The Gestation of Mendel's Dwarf." <http://www.simonmawer.com/Gestation.htm>. Accessed 28th December 2012. A wholly different perspective comes to light in a televised discussion between a geneticist and Dr Tom Shakespeare, a British sociologist renowned for his work on disability who himself has achondroplasia. In reply to a comment by the geneticist that he was sure that "Dr Shakespeare would prefer not to be handicapped," Shakespeare replied "I'm happy the way I am. I would never have wanted to be different." Cited in J. Glover, *Choosing Children: The Ethical Dilemmas of Genetic Intervention*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 17.

¹³ A. Buchanan, D.W. Brock, N. Daniels and D. Wikler, *From Chance to Choice: Genetics and Justice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000. This book was one of the fruits of that proportion of US government funding for the Human Genome Project which was allocated to the consideration of its ethical, legal and social implications.

¹⁴ J. Harris, "Liberation in Reproduction," in E. Lee (ed.), *Designer Babies: Where Should We Draw the Line?* London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002, pp. 50-1.

¹⁵ Objection to the routine use of genetic technologies to 'select out' embryos considered to have undesirable genes based on the concern that doing so effectively displays an unacceptable attitude towards existing people with the corresponding disabilities is often dubbed 'the expressivist critique' in bioethical literature. See, for example, the discussion in R. Sparrow, "Genes, identity and the 'expressivist critique'," in L. Skene and J. Thompson (ed.), *The Sorting Society: The Ethics of Genetic Screening and Therapy*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

philosopher whose views I consider to be an example of this more cautious support for genetic technology, illustrates how a more indirect discrimination finds expression in a presumption against those deemed “disabled” having children. An example he gives is worth quoting at length:

“Kay Redfield Jamison, a distinguished psychologist who has co-authored the major textbook on manic depression, and who also has the illness, describes a physician asking about her psychiatric history and then asking if she planned to have children. When she said she wanted children, he asked her if she knew manic-depressive illness was a genetic disease. Stifling an urge to remind him about her professional life, she said she did. He said: ‘You shouldn’t have children. You have manic-depressive illness.’ With a sarcasm he seemed not to notice, Kay Jamison asked whether this was because she would be an inadequate mother or because it was best not to bring another manic-depressive into the world. He replied, ‘Both’. Kay Jamison describes how distressing she found these brutal comments. Her own response goes to the heart of the issue, saying that ‘it had never occurred to me not to have children simply because I had manic-depressive illness. Even in my blackest depressions, I never regretted having been born ... I was enormously glad to have been born, grateful for life, and I couldn’t imagine not wanting to pass on life to someone else.’”¹⁶

But what both the radical and more cautious versions of enthusiasm for embryo selection tend to marginalise is a more fundamental concern. Notable philosophers of a previous generation have encouraged us to consider, prior to the question of how we may use new technologies prudently and justly, whether the manner in which we new technologies may cause us to become enslaved a technological imperative that dominates and, therefore, constricts our perspective of the material world (including our own bodily nature). In contrast to its conventional use nowadays as a collective noun for artefacts we construct, Martin Heidegger is renowned for conceiving of ‘modern technology’ as a mode of living which filters our perception of the world, and thereby shapes the manner in which we respond to it.¹⁷ Modern technology, he suggested, reinforces a mindset which apprehends all things as “standing reserve” (*Bestand*), a malleable supply of raw energy to be ordered or reordered according to our desires.¹⁸ In a similar vein Hans Jonas, a student of Heidegger, observed a paradigm shift in the relationship between humanity and nature brought on by the extensive power which modern technological devices give us to manipulate that which is given. But he warned that in conferring such power, modern technology also stimulates within us an insatiable desire for innovation, and so also perpetual dissatisfaction with what is possible at any given time. Jonas claims that innovative technological achievements are “always breeding new wants,”¹⁹ causing our appetite to increase control over nature, including our human nature, reductively to define our sense of purpose in life (rather like Gollum’s all-consuming desire for the power of the ring in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* impoverishes his life over time).²⁰ One sign that our own society is experiencing the impoverishing effects on its

¹⁶ K. R. Jamieson, *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness*. London, UK: Picador, 1997, pp. 190–2. Cited in Glover, *Choosing Children*, p. 32. Later in the same book, Glover concludes that “[t]here is a case for optimism in principle and caution in practice” (p. 101).

¹⁷ For a comprehensive account of Heidegger’s understanding of modern technology which touches on its relationship to Christian thought, see B. Brock, *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010, pp. 31–65.

¹⁸ M. Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in D. F. Krell (ed. & trans.), *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings: From “Being and Time” (1927) to “The Task of Thinking” (1964)*. London, UK: Routledge, 1993, pp. 308–341. See especially pp. 322–325.

¹⁹ H. Jonas, “Toward a Philosophy of Technology,” *Hastings Centre Report* 9, no. 1 (February 1979), p. 40.

²⁰ So Jonas concludes that “[o]utshining in prestige and starving in resources whatever else belongs to the fullness of man, the expansion of his power is accompanied by a contraction of his self-conception and being.” H. Jonas,

outlook of a fixation on technologically-driven choice is its rather ironic dissatisfaction with our current general state of bodily health, at a time when, in many ways, it has never been better. Consider the following observation by Michael Banner:

“Strangely, at a time when life expectancies in the affluent West are at levels which would have astonished our grandparents, let alone our great-grandparents, we have become anxious consumers of stories which treat our health as a subject of intense interest and concern ... It is as if we think our lives especially fragile just as they have never been more secure; as if we found people who lived in a land of plenty, endlessly worried about the risks of famine. Life has to be corrected, saved, extended, perfected, improved, shaped, modified, and enhanced. ... We behave as if we are living in a deeply unsatisfactory present, and invest our hopes in a future which will allow us to reach our proper potential and fullness.”²¹

In *Mendel's Dwarf*, the boundaries of a ‘chance’ biological state rapidly become the focus of a momentous choice when Benedict Lambert achieves his ambition and identifies the genetic abnormality responsible for achondroplasia. The blinkered anxiety revealed in Banner’s observation finds expression in the story as one of the characters, Jean Piercey, disregards the feelings of both her husband and Benedict in pursuit of a child with ‘desirable’ characteristics. Jean, the librarian at the institute where Benedict works, is unable to conceive a child by her husband. Before making his groundbreaking discovery, Jean and Benedict have a covert affair which results in Jean becoming pregnant. Fear of the fifty – fifty chance that her offspring may be a dwarf causes Jean to terminate the pregnancy. This is a fear which the novel clearly presents as being about the ‘undesirability’ of a dwarf child, rather than any suspicion her husband may harbour about the child’s true father if he or she turned out to be a dwarf.²² But as Benedict discovers the genetic marker for achondroplasia, new possibilities open up that were hitherto inconceivable for Jean (pun intended!). Knowing from personal experience that Benedict’s sperm are fertile, Jean now asks him to become the secret father of her child (which she will pass off as her husband’s child). Furthermore, she wants him illegally to use pre-implantation genetic diagnosis to identify and eliminate those amongst the several embryos formed from their gametes which have the marker for achondroplasia that Benedict has discovered. In the light of our foregoing discussion, we might say that entranced by a technocratic mindset, Jean perceives not only these embryos, but her relationship with both husband and one-time lover as “standing-reserve,” that is, as material to be manipulated to meet her desired ends. With poignant irony that epitomises Heidegger’s concern that we may lose sight of the limitations of a technological imperative, Jean describes this proposal as the first clever idea she has had in her whole life!²³

Benedict agrees to put Jean’s proposal into action, albeit on a condition that I will not reveal here (to spare your blushes and to avoid spoiling every detail of the story!) His decision to do so brings us to a moment which is crucial for the plot’s direction, noteworthy for this lecture, and worth quoting at length because it illuminates a third relevant theme:

“Benedict Lambert is sitting in his laboratory playing God. He has eight embryos in eight little tubes. Four of the embryos are proto-Benedicts, proto-dwarfs; the other four are, for want of a better word, normal. How should he choose?

“Technology and Responsibility: Reflections on the New Tasks of Ethics,” in *Philosophical Essays*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 11.

²¹ M. Banner, *Christian Ethics: A Brief History*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, pp. 134-5.

²² See Mawer, *Mendel's Dwarf*, pp. 188–191.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 218. c.f. Brock, *Christian Ethics* p. 56.

Of course, we all know that God has opted for the easy way out. He has decided on chance as the way to select one combination of genes from another. If you want to shun euphemisms, then God allows pure luck to decide whether a mutant child or a normal child shall be born. But Benedict Lambert has the possibility of beating God's proxy and overturning the tables of chance. He can choose ... What did he choose? That's your test. Eight green bottles sitting on the wall; eight plastic tubes sitting in the refrigerator. What to do with them? Which of them accidentally fell?"²⁴

For some time afterwards, the reader is left in suspense about whether Benedict chose:

- a) to comply with Jean's request by selecting only 'normal' embryos for implantation,
- b) to challenge its propriety by selecting randomly or implanting a mixture of embryos, including one with 'normal' characteristics and another with the genetic 'mutation' denoting achondroplasia, or
- c) to take revenge for her insensitive abuse of their relationship by implanting only embryos affected by achondroplasia.

Complaints that current and foreseeable developments in genetic technology offer a seductive invitation to us to 'play God' are commonly, and at times rather carelessly, recited when this moral topic is discussed. Typically, appeals to the danger of 'playing God' suggest that a particular biotechnological intervention represents a hubristic usurping of power over our creaturely lives that is properly the prerogative of God. Ted Peters says of this expression that "[i]ts primary role is that of a warning."²⁵ As such, it has value in expressing an intuitive sense of our creaturely limitations conducive to humility and restraint,²⁶ but of itself offers no substantial grounds for discriminating between occasions and kinds of prenatal intervention that are legitimate, and those that are not.

Benedict Lambert is described above as 'playing God' with embryos, evoking the sombre note of warning against transgressing boundaries typically intended when this expression is used. However, that typical association is then subverted: God is presented as conspicuous by his apparent inactivity where proactive genetic choices are concerned; it is the geneticist who maintains the 'God-like' power to choose. The reader, in turn, is invited by this role reversal to consider the notion of 'playing God' afresh: What does it really mean to 'play God' in the way that God plays God? Of course, the portrayal of God here serves a literary rather than theological purpose. It contributes to our sense of Benedict's acerbic wit and deep resentment of his condition rather than offering a carefully considered account of the doctrine of providence! But this is sufficient to draw our attention to a third theme, namely what is actually implied for the appropriation of genetic technology by a moral commitment to conformity with the character of the God discovered in the Gospel story; "to live in coherence with who this God is and with what this God is doing."²⁷

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 249-50.

²⁵ T. Peters, *Playing God? Genetic Determinism and Human Freedom*. London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2003, p. 2.

²⁶ Song, *Human Genetics*, pp. 4-5.

²⁷ J. Colwell, *Living the Christian Story: The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics*. Edinburgh and New York, NY: T&T Clark, p. 111. Colwell, a contemporary British Baptist theologian, depicts the Christian moral life in terms of living in conformity to the character of God, adding that "character cannot be reduced to rules and regulations any more than it can be reduced to propositions. It is, perhaps, partly for this reason that Jeremiah anticipates the fulfilment of the covenant in terms of God's law being written on people's hearts and minds rather than on tablets of stone: ultimately only character can portray character" (p. 112).

Examining the issue of human genetic selection through the lens of a contemporary novel has brought three important themes to light, all of which we will have cause to revisit in this lecture. First, Benedict's life-story suggests the ambiguity of specifying criteria for predicting a worthwhile life before the story of a particular person's life has had an opportunity to unfold. Second, attitudes which emerge, as the plot thickens, point to the danger that our vision of the meaning and purpose of human life may be reduced to slavish obedience to a technological imperative. Third, Benedict's sardonic musings on the circumstances of his genetic mutation raise the question, at least for theists, of what it means in practice to conform to the character of God as we consider the extent to which prenatal genetic screening should be appropriated.

Before going any further, I want briefly to address the inescapable but controversial question of whether, from conception, each human embryo has an inherent dignity that demands its protection from any harmful intervention. This is a widely held view within the Christian community, perhaps best known through its expression in official Roman Catholic teaching. The Catholic church's resistance to any prenatal interventions other than those which are therapeutic for the embryo or foetus affected is based on the account it offers of the beginning of human life. We may take as representative a statement in the *Declaration on Procured Abortion*, prepared by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith:

"From the time the ovum is released, a new life is begun which is neither that of the father nor of the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth. ... Right from fertilisation is begun the adventure of a human life, and each of its great capacities requires time ... to find its place and to be in a position to act."²⁸

There are, of course, dissenters from this view within the sphere of Christian bioethical scholarship who align themselves with well established alternatives. These include Christians who maintain that a suitable boundary mark for the beginning of an embryo's protective status comes fourteen days after conception, when twinning is no longer possible, the so-called 'primitive streak' has formed and, in a normal pregnancy, implantation would occur.²⁹ Other Christians find the gradualist approach compelling, which presumes that the moral status of an embryo increases as the embryo develops, and therefore so should the degree of restriction on its use.³⁰

My own view is that we should at least act on the assumption that the human embryo belongs to the community of persons from fertilisation. But I part company with the Catholic view because I think that neither consideration *necessarily* rules out the destruction of some embryos in a process of genetic selection. Two considerations inform my view, the first providing the basis for the second. Firstly, the very fact that the status of an early human embryo is the subject of controversy commends restraint on the grounds of reasonable doubt: To use the title of Robert Song's essay on this point, "To be willing to kill what for all one knows is a person is to be

²⁸ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Procured Abortion*, §12-13 (1974). Quoted in Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Vitae: Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation*. London, UK: Catholic Truth Society, 1987, p. 13. On the implications of this as limiting prenatal intervention to actions judged therapeutic for the particular embryo concerned, see 'The Catholic Bishops' Joint Committee on Bioethical Issues, *Genetic Intervention on Human Subjects*. London, UK: Catholic Bishops' Joint Committee on Bioethical Issues, 1996, pp. 42-3.

²⁹ e.g. R. Cole-Turner, "Principles and Politics: Beyond the Impasse over the Embryo," in B. Waters and R. Cole-Turner (ed.), *God and the Embryo: Religious Voices on Stem Cells and Cloning*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003, pp. 90-1.

³⁰ e.g. C. Deane-Drummond, *Genetics and Christian Ethics*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 145.

willing to kill a person.”³¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer gives added weight to this plea to err on the side of caution when, in discussing abortion, he concludes that “[d]iscussion of the question whether a human being is already present confuses the simple fact that, in any case, God wills to create a human being and that the life of this developing human being has been deliberately taken.”³² Secondly, to recognise that the human embryo *could* be a human being is, at the same time, to recognise that it could be an *embryonic* human being. In other words, if it is a human being, it is the kind of human being whose defencelessness and dependence are particularly pronounced. From the standpoint of the Gospel, I think caution requires that embryos be regarded as amongst the “least” of our neighbours, those for whom attentive care rather than exploitation is a Gospel mandate.³³ As I said, these considerations may not *necessarily* reject any instance of ‘selecting out’ embryos on genetic grounds, but I believe they give us grounds to assume we need stringent reasons for doing so.

With this in mind, I will proceed by outlining one approach to discerning when we might select or discard embryos before implantation which has received significant attention recently. This approach employs the principle of ‘Procreative Beneficence’, as formulated by Julian Savulescu. I will then examine a theological account of human action which seems, at least implicitly, sympathetic to Procreative Beneficence as a fitting expression of our calling to be “Created Co-Creators” with God. However, I will go on to commend Samuel Wells’ appeal to the theatrical practice of ‘Improvisation’ as a more appropriate way of understanding Christian ethics, and draw some conclusions from Well’s account for the practice of human genetic selection.

2. Theological Support for Procreative Beneficence?

The principle of Procreative Beneficence became a prominent feature of recent discourse about the moral scope of prenatal genetic interventions after Julian Savulescu published his 2001 paper, “Procreative Beneficence: Why we Should Select the Best Children.”³⁴ As this title suggests, ‘Procreative Beneficence’ offers one kind of answer to the implicit questions raised by the first and second of the three moral themes brought to light by the narrative of *Mendel’s Dwarf*:

- 1) It offers a rationale for embryo selection based on an estimate of the expected quality of future life in each case.
- 2) It takes the expanded possibilities for choice created by advances in genetic selection, and sees in them a reason to urge new obligations for prospective parents.

This paper has since evoked various critical responses, and Savulescu’s responses to criticism have occasioned more nuanced expressions of the principle in his more recent writing. Thus my outline of his approach will mainly draw on a more recent account Savulescu gives of Procreative Beneficence, in which we find the principle defined as follows:

³¹ R. Song, “To Be Willing to Kill What for All One Knows is a Person is to be Willing to Kill a Person”, in Waters and Cole-Turner, *God and the Embryo*, pp. 98-107.

³² D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. Translated by I. Todt, H. Todt, E. Feil and C. Green. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005, p. 206.

³³ P. Clarke and A. Linzey, *Research on Embryos: Politics, Theology and Law*. London, UK: Lester Crook, 1988, pp. 60-1. See also B. Waters, “Does the Human Embryo have a Moral Status,” in Waters and Cole-Turner, *God and the Embryo*, p. 74.

³⁴ J. Savulescu, “Procreative Beneficence: Why we Should Select the Best Children,” *Bioethics* 15, no. 5/6 (October 2001), pp. 413-426.

“couples (or single reproducers) should select the child, of the possible children they could have, who is expected to be as free from disabilities [as defined by a ‘welfarist’ account of disability] as possible, based on the relevant, available information, subject to the costs of pursuing that goal.”³⁵

The final phrase of this definition sums up Savulescu’s response to one critic who suggested that Procreative Beneficence was flawed because it obliged others, specifically prospective mothers, to undertake excessive burdens and risks to increase the likelihood of birthing the ‘best’ possible children.³⁶ That this criticism of Procreative Beneficence need not apply becomes apparent once we recognise that Savulescu is working with a consequentialist theory of maximising wellbeing through reproductive choices, which *includes* in its calculation the wellbeing of other parties, e.g. the child’s parents.³⁷ Furthermore, being a calculation of a future state of affairs, his “decision-theoretic consequentialism” inevitable seeks to quantify probabilities rather than certainties, and so Procreative Beneficence asks no more than that parents select embryos based on a carefully considered *expectation* of which will have the best life.³⁸ In an earlier paper, Savulescu also specifies the obligatory force of “should” in his definition of Procreative Beneficence, stating that it “implies that persuasion is justified, but not coercion.”³⁹

Any estimation of a person’s ‘wellbeing,’ that is, how well we might reasonably expect a person’s whole life to go,⁴⁰ involves considering both the properties which that person has, or is likely to have (i.e. their personal attributes), and the condition of their body and mind. But it also involves considering, as far as possible, the environments and circumstances that each individual is likely to be in as their life unfolds. It is these two considerations taken together which characterise the ‘welfarist’ account of disability to which Savulescu appeals as the basis on which parents should undertake embryo selection. In another paper co-authored by Savulescu and Guy Kahane, the welfarist account of disability is defined as “a stable physical or psychological property of subject S that leads to a reduction of S’s level of well-being in circumstances C.”⁴¹ In other words, the welfarist account of disability challenges what is typically known as the ‘medical model’ of disability, which understands disability in terms of whether a condition causes the person concerned to deviate from ‘normal species functioning.’ Kahane and Savulescu insist that the context in which someone is living affects what is identified

³⁵ J. Savulescu, “Procreative Beneficence: Reasons to not have Disabled Children,” in Skene and Thompson, *The Sorting Society*, p. 58.

³⁶ See I. de Melo-Martin, “On our Obligation to Select the Best Children: a Reply to Savulescu,” *Bioethics* 18 no. 1 (2004), pp. 72-83.

³⁷ Savulescu, “Procreative Beneficence: Reasons to not have Disabled Children,” in Skene and Thompson, *The Sorting Society*, p. 58. Consequentialism, as the name suggests, is a moral theory which suggests that the moral goodness of an action should be judged solely by its consequences. Historically, there have been various versions of consequentialism which qualify this overarching definition, but the details of these need not concern us here. For more information, see N. Messer, *Christian Ethics*. London, UK: SCM Press, 2006, pp. 74-82.

³⁸ Savulescu, “Procreative Beneficence: Reasons to not have Disabled Children,” in Skene and Thompson, *The Sorting Society*, p. 53.

³⁹ Savulescu, “Procreative Beneficence: Why we Should Select the Best Children,” p. 414. See also the discussion in M. Häyry, *Rationality and the Genetic Challenge: Making People Better?* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 66-7.

⁴⁰ Savulescu, “Procreative Beneficence: Reasons to not have Disabled Children,” in Skene and Thompson, *The Sorting Society*, p. 53.

⁴¹ G. Kahane and J. Savulescu, “The Welfarist Account of Disability,” in K. Brownlee and A. Cureton, *Disability and Disadvantage*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 25. This initial statement of the welfarist account of disability undergoes some further qualification as the authors examine its utility in the light of possible objections and concrete illustrations. But presenting it in its basic form here is sufficient to demonstrate how the welfarist account diverges from the more established medical and social models of disability.

as a disability. However, the authors of the welfarist account also question the claims typically put forward by advocates of a 'social model' of disability. Against the emphasis these advocates put on social circumstances and attitudes being disabling for people with certain conditions, Savulescu and Kahane believe that the majority of conditions which tend to fall under the category of 'disability' or 'disease' as defined by the medical model will likely be judged as disabling under their welfarist model as well. In fact, they argue that "in the circumstances obtaining in our world and in the likely future, even if we were able to largely remove the effects of social prejudice it would still be better if many commonly recognised disabilities were prevented or corrected."⁴²

Deafness is an example Savulescu explores to demonstrate his approach in practice. Like other conditions, whether or not being deaf is a disability will depend on the context: Savulescu points out that "[d]eafness would be a positive advantage in an environment of extremely loud and distracting noise."⁴³ But is that sufficient ever to predict in advance that being deaf could be expected not to reduce a person's overall wellbeing? This hypothesis was actually put to the test when a deaf lesbian couple sought legal permission deliberately to select for a deaf child using sperm from a deaf male donor.⁴⁴ This couple argued that, rather than reducing wellbeing, being deaf enabled a person to share in a rich culture of deafness, including the silent language of sign language, which would otherwise be unavailable to them. Whilst Savulescu doubts the cogency of this reasoning, he nevertheless accepts, for argument's sake, the possibility that we cannot predict the extent to which being deaf benefits a person's overall life. But the decisive factor for Savulescu is then which alternative offers the most scope for choice in later life. People with hearing can opt to learn sign language, but those without hearing stand far less chance of becoming as proficient in languages reliant on speech. At present, hearing aids and cochlear implants cannot match the quality of being able fully to hear. Thus he concludes: "[s]ince the hearing can become deaf, but the deaf cannot become hearing (to the same extent), it is better that our children hear. If they really believe that it is better to be deaf later in life, they can wear ear muffs or have the nerves to their ears cut."⁴⁵ For Savulescu, the ability to choose makes the difference. If in doubt, implanting embryos more likely to have a wider range of choice over their lives is a suitable criterion for selection. Therefore, given that the option to hear and the option to be deaf are not equally reversible should the person later choose to change her state of hearing, then Procreative Beneficence calls for the selection of embryos genetically equipped for hearing over those with markers for deafness (all other factors being equal). This prioritising of choice is a feature of Procreative Beneficence that we shall have reason to revisit later.

A theological approach to moral action which is sympathetic to the way Procreative Beneficence deals with two of the three moral themes we have identified (anticipating the better future and enabling wider choice) will, even if only tacitly, point towards a more interventionist response to third, the use of genetic technologies to conform to the character of God. Such is the case with Ted Peters' writings on bioethics, which provide a clear example of the kind of assumptions and emphases that can be found in a number of like-minded theological treatments of what it means to be human and the role of technology in realising God's purposes. A number of these accounts, Peters' included, draw inspiration from Karl Rahner's proposal that the "essential nature" of

⁴² Ibid., p. 52.

⁴³ Savulescu, "Procreative Beneficence: Reasons to not have Disabled Children," in Skene and Thompson, *The Sorting Society*, p. 56.

⁴⁴ See the discussion in J. Savulescu, "Education and Debate: Deaf Lesbians, 'Designer Disability', and the Future of Medicine," *British Medical Journal* 325 (7367), pp. 771-3.

⁴⁵ Savulescu, "Procreative Beneficence: Reasons to not have Disabled Children," in Skene and Thompson, *The Sorting Society*, p. 64.

human being is “not an intangible something, essentially permanent and complete, but the commission and power which enable him to be free to determine himself to his ultimate final state.”⁴⁶ Peters argues that the human power to choose is fundamental to human freedom, and a God-given means by which human beings “further the development of their own selfhood.”⁴⁷ It is also worth noting that a commitment to securing improved human health and well-being for a future generation prompts Peters to respond to the element of reasonable doubt surrounding the moral status of a human embryo quite differently to the way I argued for earlier. For him, the fact that “[n]ature has not to date stood up and offered us a clear definition of a person, nor told us precisely when personhood begins” confers the benefit of the doubt to using embryos as a source of stem cells for medical research.⁴⁸ Indeed, the resonance between his approach and Savulescu’s application of Procreative Beneficence sounds all the clearer because Peters argues that the therapeutic potential of research using human stem cells grounds what he dubs “the beneficence argument,” and gives it the dominant moral claim in this case.⁴⁹

Underlying Ted Peters’ bioethical convictions is his claim that technology is central to the human calling to share in the transforming work of God’s continuing creation. Indeed, at one point he expresses this rather exuberantly, claiming that:

“We are *condemned* to be creative. We cannot avoid it. The human being is a tool maker and a tool user. We are *homo faber*. We cannot be human without being technological, and technology changes things for good or ill. ... Yet despite its occasional deleterious consequences, we humans have no choice but to continue to express ourselves technologically and, hence, creatively.”⁵⁰

To my mind, there are strong hints here of the danger to which Heidegger and Jonas alerted us, hints that pave the way for what I think turns out to be a rather uncritical enthusiasm for new genetic technologies in Ted Peters’ ethical writings. With this in mind, we should also note Philip West’s observation that the very term “creative” has positive overtones, so that to use it of a particular action is, at the same time, to imply the legitimacy of that action. This evaluative connotation carries the danger that designating actions as “creative” can “serve to conceal dubious aspects of human behaviour.”⁵¹ Significant theological shortcomings in Peters’ approach arise from his extensive dependence on Philip Hefner’s account of human beings as God’s “created co-creators,” and thus it is to Hefner’s writing that I now turn to bring these shortcomings to light.⁵²

⁴⁶ K. Rahner, “The Experiment with Man,” in *Theological Investigations Vol. 9*, translated by Graham Harrison (New York: Crossroad, 1972), p. 231. Reprinted in S. Lammers and A. Verhey (ed.), *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics* (Grad Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987, pp. 230-237.

⁴⁷ T. Peters, *Playing God? Genetic Determinism and Human Freedom* (New York and London, Routledge, 2003), p. 158. Peters cites, with approval, the claim of Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki that “freedom as the ability to realize one’s potential rests upon a more fundamental definition of freedom as the ability to choose.” M. H. Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p. 131.

⁴⁸ Peters, *Playing God?*, p. 191.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁵⁰ T. Peters, “Genes, Theology and Social Ethics: Are we Playing God?,” in T. Peters (ed.), *Genetics: Issues of Social Justice* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1998), p. 29. Italics mine.

⁵¹ P. West, “Divine Creation and Human Creativity,” in *New Blackfriars* 67, no. 799 (November 1986), p. 478.

⁵² See for example T. Peters, *God – The World’s Future: Systematic Theology for a Postmodern Era* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 134 & 148, and Peters, *Playing God?*, p. 16. For Philip Hefner’s explanation of the concept of humanity as the “created co-creator” and its moral implications, see Philip Hefner, “The Evolution of the Created Co-Creator,” in P. Hefner (ed.), *Cosmos as Creation: Science and Theology in Consonance* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1989), pp. 211-233. See also P. Hefner, *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture and Religion* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 23-51 and pp. 255-279. The critical account of Hefner’s

For Philip Hefner, nature's antecedent evolutionary process is not only constitutive of human beings, but reveals to us a "natural teleonomy" in which the emergence of human cultural systems that mediate behavioural information through myth and ritual established the dual form of our identity as "biologically formed culture-creators."⁵³ Priority is accorded to this ongoing evolutionary process by virtue of Hefner's foundational conviction that it is "God's process of bringing into being a creature who represents a more complex phase of the creation's zone of freedom and who therefore is crucial for the emergence of a free creation."⁵⁴ Technological civilisation is but a further phase in this process (now the "evolutionary process-become-aware"), the natural outworking of a creaturely existence constituted by both genes and culture. Thus "both humans and technology are part of nature."⁵⁵ Technology is continuous with the progressive development of human freedom, sanctioned and celebrated as integral to the human calling to be a *co-creator*, a label which identifies human freedom with responsible decision-making.⁵⁶ On the one hand, by insisting that technology be recognised as part of nature, on account of its emergence from the evolutionary process like other aspects of nature, Hefner can distance himself from naive expressions of technology as external to human being.⁵⁷ But far from alerting us to the threat of being overwhelmed by a technocratic mindset, this recognition rather seems to galvanize Hefner's resolve to embrace technology as the predominant *modus operandi* of the human being, who has evolved in such a way as to bring about its advent in the evolutionary process:

"The appropriate response to technological civilisation is to recognise that it is human culture, that it is an emergent from human freedom, and that it is constituted by our self-consciousness, our constructions, and our decisions, for which we take responsibility. *An appropriate response must be the response of creatures who are themselves natural creatures, and who understand that they are responding to the natural world in the form that it has taken commensurate with their particular epoch in evolutionary history.* The agent in technological civilisation is the created co-creator."⁵⁸

Technology, although acknowledged as replete with destructive potential that must be avoided by vigilantly upholding beneficent ends, nevertheless remains the default means of continuing the evolutionary process for the whole world. The co-creators who wield it are correspondingly perceived as playing the dominant role in shaping this future, as indicated in Hefner's core proposal:

"Human beings are God's created co-creators whose purpose is to be the agency, acting in freedom, to birth the future that is most wholesome for the nature that has birthed us – the nature that is not only our own genetic heritage, but also the entire human community and the evolutionary and ecological reality in which and to which we belong. Exercising this agency is said to be God's will for humans."⁵⁹

theological anthropology that follows in this lecture is drawn from my own unpublished doctoral thesis. M. Peat, *Affirming our Human Nature: A Theological Consideration of Prenatal Genetic Modification* (Unpublished D.Phil. diss., 2011), pp. 191-199.

⁵³ Hefner, *Human Factor*, pp. 20-21.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵⁷ At one point, Hefner declares that "[h]umans do use technology; we *are* technology, in the same sense that we not only use our hands and eyes, but we are our hands and eyes." *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 155. *Italics mine.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Such an aggrandised view of the scope of human responsibility for the future sits uneasily alongside Hefner's commitment to the doctrine of *creatio continua*, which typically emphasises God's constant creative agency within a created order that is still progressing towards its completion over time.⁶⁰ When declaring his allegiance to this doctrine, Hefner hints at God's abiding benign *presence* in creation: the created order is affirmed as "reliable and friendly" on the basis of the fundamental scriptural affirmation that "God is faithful to the creation that has come into being by God's own free intention."⁶¹ But God's *agency*, from all we are told, appears to be exercised wholly indirectly, channelled through an evolutionary process now subject to the decisions and actions of technologically driven "culture-creators" who bear the image of God "as free creator of meanings."⁶² Jesus Christ, the new Adam, embodies God's proposal for the future of the evolutionary process, and so the altruism Christ models is commended as a fitting pattern to shape our pursuit of the next phase of evolution. But it is implied that the ongoing agency which actually realises the future is the preserve of human beings: "Now in freedom, the option is opened up for the race to enact what has been set forth by Jesus as God's purposes."⁶³ In effect, Hefner's suggestion that God and humanity co-create the world's future as evolution progresses thinly disguises what, following Colin Gunton, we may recognise as a modern variant of deism.⁶⁴ Since God's agency is rendered indistinguishable from the evolutionary process, it follows that once technology emerges as the dominant activity of human beings, God's agency is effectively indistinguishable from the ways in which human beings choose to exercise their technological proficiency.⁶⁵

The crucial defect here, I think, is the lack of a careful Trinitarian account of the relationship between divine and human action in the world, one which gives due attention to the fact that God does not simply indwell and endorse creaturely activity, but ultimately directs it. To uphold the biblical conviction that God's reconciliatory work in creation takes place "through the Son"⁶⁶ is to presume that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ determines and discloses the

⁶⁰ In observing this tension, my concern is neither to commend nor reject *creatio continua* as an appropriate feature of the Christian doctrine of creation, but simply to present this curious juxtaposition in Hefner's reasoning as a signpost pointing to its deistic implications. In its more obvious eighteenth century guise, Deism, of course, is a widely discredited explanation of God's relationship with the world. Though a more prevalent feature of recent Christian accounts of the doctrine of creation, *creatio continua* has been criticised for failing to observe a proper differentiation between the divine works of creation and providence which, though works of the one God, are nevertheless distinct and self-contained. Such an argument is made in K. Sonderegger, "The Doctrine of Providence," in F. Murphy and P. Ziegler (ed.), *The Providence of God* (London and New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), pp. 147-8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

⁶⁴ "Previously understood to make a mechanism and leave it to itself, the shadowy God of modern rationalism disappears further into the background as attention is called away from his action in the beginning not to his providential activity in the present, but to worldly happenings which displace or replace that activity. ... Evolution becomes capitalised, almost hypostatized – just as Richard Dawkins and others hypostatise genes as agents determining the way things are – and displaces divine providence." C. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 186. Hefner's unsubstantiated equation of God's will with the process of evolution can be seen as an expression of what Gunton recognises as an unnecessary intellectual shift, that has become entrenched during the past two centuries. The debate sparked by Darwin's writings has seen the theory of evolution transmogrified from "a relatively neutral description of the way in which more complex forms of life are seen to emerge from the less complex" into "an all-embracing ideology to account for the 'upwards' movement of the world, and of human society in particular." *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁶⁵ B. Waters, *From Human to Posthuman: Christian Theology and Technology in a Postmodern World* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2006), pp. 102-3.

⁶⁶ Colossians 1: 20.

pattern of God's providential action in a way which, for Christian moral enquiry, relativises what can be observed of the trajectory of evolution. It is to believe that God's abiding presence with us as Holy Spirit may at times co-opt our technological aspirations according to their service to God's Christocentric purposes, but may just as readily challenge our ambitions for technology. The difference this makes is well put by Colin Gunton, with an example that is particularly relevant to this lecture:

"...if the Spirit is the Spirit of God the Son who was crucified, creation may move towards its perfection as much through the enablement of, or merely acts of love for, the severely handicapped – to take one example – as by the evolution of so-called higher forms of being. ... If the Spirit is the Spirit of him who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, then the question of what represents 'progress' – the movement of creation to its true destiny – becomes a far more open one. Further, if the end of creation is the reconciliation of all things with their creator, any particular evolutionary 'advance' may or may not bring about that end. ... Against any predetermining of the question by cultural factors, we must hold that it is God the Spirit, and not the automatic forward movement of the universe, who enables the world to become what it is projected to be."⁶⁷

3. 'Overaccepting' and the Possibilities of Vocation

What I have said so far should not be taken as suggesting I am necessarily against any and all talk of human beings 'co-creating' with God. There is a lively debate amongst Christian theologians about whether the term 'co-creator' is a suitable way to describe human beings co-ordinating their action with God, but this is not the place to get further into it.⁶⁸ Here, I am more concerned with flaws in the particular collection of assumptions which Peters and Hefner associate with this phrase, because their assumptions have had a significant influence in Christian bioethics.

What I have found more persuasive is an approach linked to a different image. Rather than depict human moral action as 'co-creating' with God, Samuel Wells suggests that Christians are called to 'improvise' when confronted with new situations. This is because, as he puts it, "Improvisation in the theatre is a practice through which actors seek to develop trust in themselves and one another in order that they may conduct unscripted dramas without fear,"⁶⁹ and Christian ethics is essentially a matter of faithfully improvising on the Christian tradition. Crucial to Wells' outlook, and an important safeguard against his falling prey to the deistic tendencies of Hefner's thought, is his adaptation of Tom Wright's account of the role of the church in creation as working out the final act of a five act play.⁷⁰ Wells agrees with Wright that, in the 'act' in which their actions contribute to the 'script' of God's story, Christians are to behave in ways that are both innovative and yet consistent with the character of the preceding acts. However, he rightly questions Wright's claim that the life of the church constitutes the *final* act of God's story, since to do so fails to give a distinct and authoritative place to eschatology, the doctrine which makes clear that it is God, and not human creatures, who brings the story to

⁶⁷ Gunton, "The Triune Creator," p. 188.

⁶⁸ See for example N. Messer, *Selfish Genes and Christian Ethics: Theological and Ethical Reflections on Evolutionary Biology* (London: SCM Press, 2007), p. 232; S. Hauerwas, "Work as Co-Creation: A Critique of a Remarkably Bad Idea," in S. Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), pp. 109-125.

⁶⁹ S. Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (London: SPCK, 2004), p. 11.

⁷⁰ N.T. Wright, "How can the Bible be Authoritative?," *Vox Angelica* 21 (1991). C.f. Wells, *Improvisation*, p. 51.

its rightful end. By recognising that improvisatory Christian action undertaken through the gift of the Holy Spirit contributes to the *penultimate* act of God's story, "[t]he role of the fourth act balances the need for a genuinely human dimension to the drama, with the need for a genuinely divine shape," whilst also ensuring that in the final eschatological 'act', "the God who began the story and transformed the story will end the story as he sees fit."⁷¹ The shortcomings evident in Hefner's account correspond with what Wells explains as behaving as if the play had only one act, in which "[a]ll achievements, all results, all outcomes must be celebrated and resolved before the final whistle."⁷²

Wells makes clear that true theatrical improvisation is very different from the notion of 'making it up as you go along' which it is sometimes thought to be. Rather: "Christian ethics and theatrical improvisation are both about years of steeping in a tradition so that the body is so soaked in practices and perceptions that it trusts itself in community to do the obvious thing" ('obvious' is best understood in this context as that which flows naturally and intuitively when someone has internalised the distinctive virtuous habits of Christian discipleship).⁷³ Wells speaks of six "modes of activity" which actors learn for the art of improvisation which are relevant to the art of Christian ethics. I will focus on Wells' treatment of one of these modes in particular, the practice of 'overaccepting' an offer, because I think it offers an important insight into theological thinking about pre-implantation selection based on genetic characteristics.

Two actors improvising on a stage may work through a routine that involves three kinds of actions. Their technical theatrical terms are "offer," "accept," and "refuse." An 'offer' is basically anything an actor does, to which another actor is invited to respond. The second actor's response may be to 'accept' or 'block.' 'Accepting' involves extending the premise of the offer and carrying it on so the story keeps going. 'Blocking' is to respond in such a way that the offered premise is undermined and the story cut short. A simple example Wells gives makes this clear.⁷⁴ When a child in a playground puts two fingers together, points them towards another child, then clicks another finger and say, "Bang, you're dead," the first child is making an offer. The second child can accept by clutching his chest, howling and dropping to the ground, so keeping the story going. Or the second child could 'block', which in this case could simply mean ignoring the offer or saying something like 'I don't want to play that game.' In other words, blocking is something that undermines the premise of the offer, and prevents the story from unfolding. Wells suggests that when faced with any offer, "accepting sees the future as an opportunity – blocking sees the future as a problem."⁷⁵ Accepting an offer accommodates and encourages the other. It allows space and time to be shared in ways that foster continuing conversation rather than assumes the need for combative rivalry. So Wells argues that because Christians can trust in God's redemptive future, they need never block *any* offer to which they are invited to respond.⁷⁶ I have a lingering doubt about Wells' reasoning here, and wonder whether he is perhaps pressing the analogy between Christian ethics and theatrical improvisation a little too far at this point. But what I do think offers a helpful direction for our purposes here is Wells' description of the way Christians should respond to sinister offers, given that he considers blocking them to be a fear-driven, even violent, gesture that tarnishes our trust in God's future. Faced with threatening offers, Wells proposes that Christians find a way to 'overaccept' the offer.

⁷¹ Wells, *Improvisation*, p. 53 & 52.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷⁴ The example is outlined in *ibid.*, p. 106.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ See the discussion in *ibid.*, pp. 108–111.

To ‘overaccept’ an offer means to accept the offer in the light of a larger story.⁷⁷ For Christians, this of course is the Gospel story with its eschatological perspective on the present existence. In so doing, the original offer is reframed and transformed in ways that potentially enlarge and often subvert the perspective of the one who made the offer. This, Wells suggests, is a recurrent motif in Jesus’ ministry. It is the form of response encapsulated in the one who turns the other cheek, offers his cloak to someone who demands his coat, and walks a second mile having been forced to walk the first. The Sermon on the Mount reveals Jesus overaccepting the Mosaic law in what are known as the ‘six antitheses’ (those sayings that take the form, “you have heard it said ... but I say to you ...”). In fact, as far as Wells is concerned, overaccepting depicts what God is doing in the whole Gospel narrative of Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection.⁷⁸

To illustrate how even the most sinister of offers need not be blocked by transformed by overaccepting it, Wells recalls the example of St. Laurence, deacon of the church in Rome during the third century. The Roman magistrate ordered Laurence to bring into the church all its riches. This was clearly a threatening offer. Laurence accepted it, but did so in a profound and subversive way. Three days after receiving this demand, Laurence filled the church with the poor, the lame, the orphans and widows. He accepted the magistrate’s offer, by *overaccepting* it, showing to the aggressor the deeper truth in his response by pointing to the impoverished gathering of people he had assembled and saying, “these are the riches of the church.”⁷⁹

I want to suggest that advocates of Procreative Beneficence (and those theologians who I have suggested are at least implicitly sympathetic towards its core premise) present an offer, one which the increasing use of pre-implantation genetic selection could facilitate if the assumptions underlying the offer were to be *simply* accepted. The offer can be stated as follows: We are to act in accordance with a vision for the future of what best enables human flourishing. Put in this simple form, I think it is uncontroversial to suggest that Christians regard their response as taking the form of ‘accepting’ this offer. But as we have seen, the assumption embedded in this offer is that greater choice and the removal of conditions we are culturally conditioned to assume are defects is bound to aid human flourishing. Thus Christians should be wary of simply accepting the offer on its own terms. Rather, they should embrace the opportunity to ‘overaccept’ the offer in such a way that the offer is reframed, transformed, and so enabled to point to a deeper theological truth about human freedom and the relationship between ‘weakness’ and flourishing.

The Dutch theologian Hans Reinders observes that parents of children with a disability who suggest that their parenting experience has been a rich experience are sometimes answered with a question which recasts their positive recollection as a dilemma. The respondent’s question typically goes something like this: “Were you in a position to choose whether to have this child or another, healthy one, would you choose the same child again?”⁸⁰ The assumption behind the question is that the value of the parents’ judgement derives from their having *chosen* their parenting experience, at least in principle if not in practice. In doing so, it echoes Savulescu’s priorities regarding choice, illustrated earlier with reference to the issue of pre-implantation selection and deafness. Reinders wants to sever this commonly assumed connection between life’s goodness and choice. I agree, but want to go a step further than Reinders. I propose that sometimes the very fact that certain conditions of our lives are *not* chosen, including limiting

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 131.

⁷⁸ See the discussion in Ibid., pp. 135-140.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 146-7.

⁸⁰ H. Reinders, “Life’s Goodness: On Disability, Genetics and ‘Choice’,” in J. Swinton and B. Brock (ed.), *Theology, Disability and the New Genetics* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), p. 168.

conditions conventionally regarded as disabling, can be a factor that enriches lives in unforeseen and otherwise unavailable ways. The classic biblical example of this is the apostle Paul's 'thorn in the flesh,' recounted in 2 Corinthians 12. Clearly Paul neither desires this 'thorn' (whatever it may really have been)⁸¹ nor chooses it for some personal endurance test: "Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me."⁸² Rather, it turns out to be the lack of choice Paul has in enduring the thorn that, over time, yields this spiritual insight for him: "for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."⁸³ Echoing this experience, the blind theologian John Hull once replied to a letter whose author assumed that blindness must be a negative experience for him. In his response, Hull described his blindness as a "dark, mysterious gift from God," one which he would not have chosen, but which nevertheless enabled him to rethink his values and discover a deeper intimacy with God.⁸⁴

None of what I have said above should be taken as implying that I think conditions experienced as disabling *necessarily* bring unique benefits, or that we should ever presume that they do regardless of the testimony of the person who actually experiences them. But I do think these examples give us cause to question the assumption that facilitating choice through genetic selection is a secure criterion to presuppose in advance. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has recently pointed out that the extent to which dependence and vulnerability is a fundamental quality of human life has been typically underestimated throughout the history of Western moral philosophy.⁸⁵ MacIntyre's insight may go some way to explaining what we might call 'the assumption within the assumption' which remains widespread, namely that enforced dependence in life is inherently negative and to be overcome wherever possible. It certainly provides a historical backdrop against which the proposal that enforced dependence may yield surprising riches appears as "foolishness" to the advocate of Procreative Beneficence, to coin a fitting biblical term!⁸⁶ But from a Gospel perspective, the "foolishness" of imagining that an experience of dependence without choice can be both insightful and enriching is not only coherent, it is also *vital* for our self-understanding as human creatures dependent on a loving creator as the constant source of our being. This has caused a number of moral theologians in recent years to suggest that the experience of those with conditions typically regarded as disabling can be an invaluable source of insight for others as well.⁸⁷

A striking example of this was revealed in a recent paper by Bernd Wannenwetsch about Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings regarding disability.⁸⁸ Wannenwetsch suggests that a vital

⁸¹ Various different interpretations of Paul's metaphorical 'thorn' have been offered by commentators, including physical and mental disorders, persistent temptation and persecution. See N. Messer, "The Human Genome Project, Health and the 'Tyranny of Normality,'" in C. Deane-Drummond (ed.), *Brave New World? Theology, Ethics and the Human Genome* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 2003), p. 93.

⁸² 2 Corinthians 12: 8.

⁸³ 2 Corinthians 12: 10.

⁸⁴ J. Hull, *In the Beginning there was Darkness: A Blind Person's Conversations with the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 2001), pp. 46-48. Quoted in N. Messer, "Tyranny of Normality," p. 107.

⁸⁵ A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings need the Virtues* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Carus Publishing Co., 1999), pp. 1-2.

⁸⁶ 1 Corinthians 1: 23.

⁸⁷ For example, S. Hauerwas, "The Gesture of a Truthful Story," in *Theology Today*, Vol. 42, no. 2 (July 1985), pp. 181-189; B. Wannenwetsch, "Angels with Clipped Wings: The Disabled as Key to the Recognition of Personhood" in Swinton and Brock, *Theology, Disability, New Genetics*, pp. 182-200; H. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI & Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), ch. 9.

⁸⁸ B. Wannenwetsch, "'My Strength is made Perfect in Weakness': Bonhoeffer and the War over Disabled Life," in B. Brock and J. Swinton, *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI & Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), pp. 353-369.

catalyst for Bonhoeffer's far-sighted resistance to "the nazi cult of the 'superhuman'"⁸⁹ which guided the Nazi Euthanasia policies was his experience of the 'disabled' living in community. Consequently it proved to be a formative moment for Bonhoeffer's theology as a whole. In 1933, Bonhoeffer visited a village called Bethel, a village entirely given over to the care of those with disabilities. He later wrote to his Grandmother, telling her of the impact left on him of watching their life together, in particular the experience of those in community who suffered from severe epilepsy:

"Their situation of being truly defenceless perhaps gives these people a much clearer insight into certain realities of human existence, the fact that we are indeed basically defenceless, than can be possible for healthy persons. And it is just this abrupt alteration between standing there healthy and falling down sick which must be more conducive to this insight than being healthy all the time."⁹⁰

Reflecting on Bonhoeffer's experience, Wannenwetsch points out that "[i]nstead of understanding Bethel as a ghetto of love, but a ghetto nevertheless, Bonhoeffer grasped its significance as a place of revelation ... an embodied recognition that all human life is essentially feeble, defenceless, and dependent, and so revealed neighbourly love as the matrix of all human sociality."⁹¹

What this raises is the possibility that those who live with conditions that they or others may regard as disabling may, over time, prove to be fulfilling a vocation through their experience. That is, they realise a distinct calling from God, with a particular constellation of tasks specific to them, which contributes to the outworking of God's purposes in the world.⁹² The examples of 'disabled' experience I have cited have tended to hint at a vocation to educate others about the truth of the human condition, though the possibilities are by no means limited to this (nor, for that matter, do they necessarily require a person to be aware that he or she is fulfilling such a vocation). Let me be clear that in suggesting this, I am not making the crude and presumptuous claim that people with conditions experienced as disabling must have been *given* that condition by God for a particular purpose. What I am making is the more modest claim that it is quite conceivable, likely even given the examples above, that God can enable an experience of disability to become an integral and conducive component of the vocation that a person lives out throughout their lives.⁹³ Furthermore, since from a Christian perspective it is the discovery and living out of our vocation throughout our lives that *defines* our flourishing as human creatures, and not our conformity to some culturally determined bodily ideal, we do not *need* to select out in advance those people-to-be whose genotype suggests they could experience the disabilities we deem undesirable. Further corroboration of this theological reasoning can be derived from recognising, as Amos Yong has emphasised recently, that a biblical eschatological vision of our

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 362.

⁹⁰ D. Bonhoeffer, "Letter to Julie Bonhoeffer, August 20, 1933," from Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 12: *Berlin: 1932-33*. Edited by L. Rasmussen. Translated by I. Best (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2009). Reprinted in Brock and Swinton (ed.), *Disability in the Christian Tradition*, pp. 370-371.

⁹¹ B. Wannenwetsch, "My Strength is made Perfect in Weakness," p. 355.

⁹² This summary of a Christian understanding of vocation draws on O. O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 51.

⁹³ Robert Adams articulates the distinction I am seeking to draw here by suggesting that there is difference between "the situation *in* which we are called and the projects *to* which we are called," because "[t]he vocation is not the circumstances, but what one is called to do in them." R. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 309. My objection to the majority of possible applications of pre-implantation embryo selection is that, from a Christian perspective, they manifest an unwarranted presumptuousness about the kinds of situations that are conducive to living out a worthwhile vocation.

transformed resurrected bodies encompasses, rather than erases, bodily characteristics conventionally deemed ‘disabilities’ in a manner that reconfigures the world’s scale of values.⁹⁴

In conclusion, I have argued that Christians should, at this time, ‘overaccept’ the offer made by proponents of embryo selection to act in accordance with a vision for the future of what best enables human flourishing. But I propose that in this case, ‘overaccepting’ implies reframing the notion of freedom as autonomous choice by affirming the a priori claim of a Christian vision of freedom as vocation. The point is well made by John Webster:

“[W]e need to lay aside the assumption around which so much of our economic, political and sexual identity is organised, namely the assumption that freedom is autonomy. Freedom is, rather, the capacity to realize what one is. What we are is reconciled creatures, those set free for true humanness by the work of the triune God. To be free is not to exercise the false freedom to invent myself by my actions, nor to be creator, reconciler and perfecter to myself. Nor is it mere unrestricted will. *It is, rather, to be what I have been made to be, to fulfil my vocation as a creature of God, and so (and only so) to exist in authenticity.*”⁹⁵

The priority of vocation over autonomy for a Christian vision of human flourishing grounds my conviction that in the vast majority of instances, pre-implantation embryo selection is unnecessary and presumptuous.⁹⁶ Whilst it is an oft-stated theological truism that human life is a gift from God and should be respected accordingly, my reasoning is based on the more specific objection that the practice of pre-implantation embryo selection proceeds by discounting the possibility that a valid and enriching vocation may be found and exercised in a far broader range of life experiences than the dominant conventions of our society tend to imagine. In so doing, embryo selection generally expresses impatience in its dealings with the possibilities of human living, failing to recognise that our own place, and the place of other persons, in the unfolding of God’s providence, typically takes time to be discovered and can assume unforeseen forms.⁹⁷ Something of the possibilities that can emerge when the importance of both time and openness to the unforeseen is acknowledged is succinctly captured by Faith Bowers. Summing up thoughts on her life shared with her son Richard, who has Down’s Syndrome, Bowers observes:

⁹⁴ A. Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI & Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), ch. 5. Thus Yong observes, with reference to Jesus’ parable of the eschatological banquet in Luke 14, the banquet to which the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind are invited, that “the text clearly situates people with impairments at the final banquet *just as they are*, not with their impairments erased or made invisible. ... the honouring of people with disabilities here does not follow our thanking God that they are no longer disabled ... Instead, the disabled are honoured as people who have disabilities at the eschatological banquet ... a saviour scarred by his earthly sufferings not only is capable of saving those who are similarly marked, but actually does redeem them despite their disabilities – *or better, in, with and through their impairments.*” *Ibid.*, pp. 133–4.

⁹⁵ J. Webster, “Evangelical Freedom,” in J. Webster, *Confessing God* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2005), pp. 223–224. *Italics mine.*

⁹⁶ The qualification here is intended to hold open the possibility that there may be certain genetic conditions, identified in a pre-implantation embryo, whose expression in the child-to-be would cause so short and / or intensely painful a life that it might reasonably judged a more faithful decision to prevent that life continuing beyond its embryonic stage of development. But such a qualification would not encompass profound or milder intellectual disabilities, less severe forms of physical limitation, or predispositions to most physical or mental disorders that manifested themselves later in life. Needless to say, it would also exclude dwarfism, despite the strident complaints of Dr Benedict Lambert!

⁹⁷ D. Knight, “Time and Persons in the Economy of God,” in Murphy and Ziegler, *The Providence of God* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2009), pp. 131–143.

“The man whom Jesus healed told his questioners, ‘one thing I know: once I was blind, now I see.’ Once both Richard and his parents hated him having Down’s Syndrome. The condition remains but the pain of it has gone, and the agents of healing have been Christ, glimpsed through Down’s features, and Christ’s body the church, sharing in the pain and loving and valuing the person that Richard is, disability and all.”⁹⁸

The front cover of this lecture has an image of Mark Quinn’s controversial sculpture, *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, atop the fourth plinth of Trafalgar Square in 2005. It has been suggested that this sculpture of the artist, her disabled body made all the more conspicuous by nudity, simultaneously continues and subverts the Neoclassical sculptural tradition typically employed for sculpting idealised images of public figures.⁹⁹ It is, therefore, an artistic embodiment of the practice of overaccepting the offer to envision beauty and value in human bodily life, an echo in stone of the apostle’s vision of the body of Christ that honours the so-called ‘weaker’ member against any prevailing preoccupation with productive strength and visible achievement as preferred ideals.¹⁰⁰ As such, it is a fitting image with which to introduce and conclude this lecture.

⁹⁸ F. Bowers, *When Weak, then Strong: Disability in the Life of the Church* (London: Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, 2008), p. 179.

⁹⁹ A. Millett, “Sculpting Body Ideals: *Alison Lapper Pregnant* and the Public Display of Disability,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (Summer 2008). Available online at libres.uncg.edu/it/uncg/f/A_Millett_Sculpting_2008.pdf (accessed 15th December 2012).

¹⁰⁰ 1 Corinthians 12: 23.

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Thinking Theologically About Human Genetic Selection

This lecture uses a modern novel (*Mendel's Dwarf*) as a literary lens through which to highlight three themes relevant to moral discourse about pre-implantation genetic diagnosis and the selection of human embryos. The principle of 'Procreative Beneficence' deals with these themes in a particular way which, it is argued, is echoed in the work of two theologians whose account of human agents as 'co-creators' with God is influential in contemporary Christian bioethics. Samuel Wells' depiction of Christian ethics as 'Improvisation' is presented as an insightful corrective to theological deficiencies in this account. In particular, his appropriation of the notion of 'overaccepting' (from the terminology of theatrical improvisation) reinforces an appeal to the Christian understanding of human freedom as realising one's vocation as the appropriate basis for drawing conclusions about the practice of human genetic selection.



Michael Peat is a Baptist minister serving Whaley Bridge Uniting Partnership, a group of three churches in North Derbyshire. He originally studied Theology at King's College, University of London, and later went to Regent's Park College in Oxford to train for ministry and complete a doctorate. In 2007-08, Michael was one of the Baptist representatives on a working group set up by the Joint Public Issues Team to consider ethical issues arising in human embryology and early human life. This year, he began teaching a course on Christian ethics at Luther King House in Manchester. Michael is married to Helen, and together they have recently started getting to grips with being parents. In his spare time, he enjoys exploring the Peak District on foot, singing in a local choir, and unwinding at cinemas, theatres and art galleries.

Cover Image: Marc Quinn: Alison Lapper Pregnant (unveiled on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square on 15 September 2005, where it remained until late 2007)

Picture taken from:

<http://www.unfolding.ca/index.php/disability-aesthetics>

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